

THERE AND HERE.

BY ALICE BROWN.

PERHAPS Ruth Hollis was no more conscious at one time than another of her loneliness and heart-hunger for Rosamond Ware, the friend of her childhood, and, indeed, her entire life. It was an ever-present pain—not poignant now, but grown into that emptiness of loss which attends a broken kinship. Ruth had lived for her thirty-one years in the standstill, colonial-flavored town of Devonport. Rosamond, on the death of her father, mother, and two brothers in the space of a week, had gone to Italy to be with an older brother, a man with a jagged body and a tempered artist soul. That had not been altogether desirable, for the very fineness of his nature imposed its limitations, and he exacted much, even while he gave. She had been there eight years, from month to month prophesying her return, but never being quite able to effect it. Her unwilling feet would not drag themselves back to America. She longed for it, she brooded over shivered associations with a passionate regret, but when the moment came for clasping the lax link again, cowardice shot up in her and cried off. Her grief was poignant enough already; when she thought of voluntarily sharpening its edge, the apprehensive nerves rebelled. The house at Devonport had been given her by will, and now it was standing exactly as the family tragedy left it. The unworn garments in the closets could hardly fall more absolute prey to mice and moth; they were in

ruins already. But daily the dust and mildew of time wrote a sadder record on the blurring page, and the inexorable master of all spurred himself to show what havoc he could compass, left to his own cruel will. Again and again Ruth wrote her friend, begging her to have the house opened, aired, and cleaned; not for the sake of thrift only, she urged, but because the place was dear to both of them. There they had played together at mimic living, and loved and dreamed after living began. It was her home too, according to spiritual tenure, and she had a right to speak. But Rosamond always answered, "Not yet!" Time had rent her web of life, and she was still too selfish to enlarge the rift made in the nature of things.

One late twilight, in an ice-bound spring, Ruth was wandering about the rooms of her own home, setting them in order by an observant touch here and there, and making ready to close the house for the night. The rest of the family had gone, on sudden summons, to spend a day or two with an uncle twenty miles away, whose prodigal son had come home, and who thus bade all his accessible kin to the rejoicing. Ruth, for no tangible reason, had been disinclined to go; as the day drew nearer, her unwillingness increased, and at the very last she refused entirely, promising to spend the night and the next day with Aunt Barnard, a mile's distance out of the town. The two maids, having been given sudden

holiday, had already fastened their domain and departed. Ruth meant every minute to follow them, but the house so wooed her in its simmering afternoon warmth that she still lingered and dalled with her purpose. The fires were dying safely down, but there was a red glow in every room. The scented geraniums were sweet from the windows, and the stillness seemed benignant. At length, unable to conjure up more excuses for idling, she did get on her hat and cloak, and stood fastening the last button before the front window, where the snow lay dead white, and the great chestnut-tree stretched gaunt arms against the darkening blue. She stopped, with an arrested motion, in putting on her gloves. Some one was coming. It was a woman, walking very fast, yet very lightly, with a buoyant motion Ruth seemed to know. She wore a flowing cloak, and a great hat with a long feather. Ruth watched her with a tightening at her throat and a straining of the eyes. She came nearer, stopped, and waved her hand. It was growing dark so fast that a tangible veil seemed falling between them, but Ruth was sure she smiled.

"Rose!" she called wildly from the window. "Rosamond! Rosamond!"

The woman nodded. Ruth tore out of the front door, dropping her gloves behind her, and ran down the path. Now the new-comer was laughing, and Ruth felt a sudden passionate relief at the sweet familiarity of the sound. She began to see, in that instant, what her loneliness had been. She sobbed a little.

"I don't believe it," she whispered. "You are not really *you*!"

"That's your impudence," said Rosamond. "As if I'd take the trouble to be anybody else!"

They were walking into the house together, side by side and hand in hand. Ruth never knew whether they had kissed or not. It was quite likely they had not, for Rosamond was an elusive creature, who held that there are few moments when the soul is the better for the body's sacrament. Inside, the dark had fallen thick.

"Let me get a lamp," said Ruth, again with a little sob of joy completed. "I want to see you."

"No, Grandmother Wolf, not to-night. You're going over to the house with me."

Ruth turned back from the table and let her match burn out.

"Not to-night, dear," she entreated. "It's cold. It's—awful! You would break your heart."

"Ah, say yes!" coaxed Rosamond, in her old spoiled fashion. "Just to step inside and see whether we want to stay. Just to peep in. Why, Ruth, it's *home*!"

But while she spoke she was at the door, and Ruth was following her, saying, martyrwise:

"You'll have your way, of course. It's to be expected; but I do wish you wouldn't. Wait till morning, Rose. Only till the fires are built."

Rosamond laughed lightly and happily.

"Not an hour. Not a minute. Come, shut that door, and race me to the old stump. No letters in it now."

The door banged behind them, and they ran together down the frozen drive. Rose was mad with glee. She sped like a stream of darkness, softly, glidingly. She was first at the stump, and she staid there till Ruth came up, panting.

"Over the crust now," she laughed, in a bright exhilaration. "Come! come!" But though she ran in little dashes, and waited between, Ruth, making what shift she could to follow, crashed through and gave it up.

"Come back!" she called. "You're a fay. I'm a good twenty pounds heavier. That's according to precedent. Don't you see, it won't bear?"

But Rosamond skimmed back like a leaf, and then they went on soberly, side by side again. Ruth kept turning to look at her.

"You certainly are changed," said she; "but, oh, you're so pretty! You've got a radiance! You seem to shine! Are you my old chum?"

"Your old chum, your pal in vulgar moments, your Rose to keep."

"Then don't you wither!"

Rosamond laughed again, with that thrilling undercurrent more significant than mirth.

"I may be transplanted," said she, "but wither, no! See the little twigs pricking through the crust! Hear the tips of the pine-trees talking! Oh, what a world! what a world!"

"How you enjoy! Exactly like your old apostrophes, 'hot and hot'! You're the most universal lover I know. You're the moon that looks on many brooks.

Berries? How ever do you manage to see them in this light? But then, you always were owl-eyed and cat-footed."

It was only a short stretch of road to the Ware homestead, and then a long driveway wound up through the grounds. There the thick evergreens, untrimmed for many years, so encroached upon the way that they half sheltered it from snow, and made it still accessible. Rosamond kept darting into the fir woods, to return laden with news.

"Do you remember how we used to gather cones and burn them on the Auvil Rock? The pines are full. And the hollow locust where we found the squirrel's nest? Nobody has touched it since that day, and his greatest-great-grandson lives there now. Do you remember how we used to do up nuts in our hair, and sit under the tree to let him pull them out? The hepaticas on the bank are in such a temper—you can't think! They're waked up and ready to sprout, and there's no encouragement."

"That's according to the light of the spirit. Even you can't see under the snow, Sharp Eyes!" Ruth spoke from the dreamy acquiescence born of full content. She knew quite well that they ought not to be going by night into a deserted house, but Rosamond's assurance had lulled her will to sleep. She was penetrated by the wonder of seeing this dearest creature in the world, whom she had pictured broken and desolate, so light-some and free of care: she had no thought beyond the happy relief.

The last sweep of the driveway brought them out in front of the old house, spacious and still imposing, though so evidently the subject of a lingering death. Ruth paused an instant, not daring to look into her friend's face, and only guessing what grief must be painted there. But Rosamond dropped her arm and ran up the steps alone.

"Welcome home!" she called, blithely. "Welcome! Why do you wait?"

Ruth had stopped now in a detaining after-thought. "We're simpletons," said she. "The key is at the Daytons', where you left it. That's a sign we're not to go in. Come back, dear, and wait till morning."

But Rosamond held her place. "Come up here, doubter," cried she. "When was anything lost by trying? The oracle appears because you have previously be-

sieged the shrine. Come on! There, now. Shall I lift the latch? Shall I?"

It yielded with the old familiar click, and the great door swung open. Ruth gave a joyous little cry.

"You witch, you've got the key already!" She put a hand on Rosamond's cloak, in gentle suasion. "Let me go in first. Please! I can't bear to have you feel how cold it is, with no one to welcome you. Why, it's light!" An airy intangibility of warmth and fragrance poured out upon them like a river delayed and eager. The odors were familiar and sweet—a mystic alembic made of the breath of flowers, but so fused that you could never say which was heliotrope and which the spice of pinks. They made up a sweetness bewildering to the sense. "Oh!" she cried again; "enchantress! Merlin and Ariel in one!"

Rosamond shut the door behind them. The spirit of a delicate witchery was playing on her face while she led the way into the front room on one side of the hall; this had been the family meeting-place and talking-place in days gone by. It lay there smiling, in happy renewal of the past. A fire flickered on the hearth with the bourgeoning of new flame above old embers. The tall clock ticked in measureless content. The firelight seemed to fill the room. Ruth drew a long breath of rapturous recognition.

"How like you!" she murmured. "You came days ago, weeks ago! You put it all in order—for me. But the intention isn't all. Somebody else might have thought of it, but nobody could have done it."

"So you like it? Then I'm glad."

Two chairs were ready before the blaze. They threw off their wraps, and sank into the accustomed places. They sat for a time in silence, while the clock ticked.

"Do you remember—" began Ruth.

"Yes; that was the last time we were here together. I was telling you, over and over again, that the lonesome house would kill me. I behaved like a child—an ignorant, untrained child."

"I won't hear you blamed. You were beside yourself."

"I was a child," repeated Rosamond, conclusively. "I can't imagine any one so ignorant, so pathetic in ignorance. I told you death denied the laws of life. I could only think of my mother in her coffin. I was a savage."

Ruth turned and looked at her in the firelight. Her face lay soft and lovely under a very happy seriousness. She seemed absolutely serene, with the well-being of out-door things, the pine-trees, and the snow.

"Rosamond," said her friend, impulsively, "have you got religion?"

Rosamond laughed out. "You are so droll!" she answered at once. "I might as well ask, have you got air in your lungs? Have you?"

"But you're so changed, and for the better. You've grown."

"I had to grow," said Rosamond, whimsically. "Part of it at a jump! But let's not talk about finalities. There's one thing I meant to write you about. I made my will, two months ago, and left this house for a home for tired women. It's to be called the Margaret Home—for my own mother, you know. It's to be for middle-aged, tired women: their very own, so that they can come here from the cities and rest. I have named you executor, but I wanted to speak about it, too. There's nothing in particular to say, for you would always know how I should like things; still, I thought it would be well to mention it."

Ruth drew nearer, in sudden fear; but the firelight, still playing over Rosamond's face, only brought out the wholesome tints of ruddy cheek and clear gray eye.

"You're not going to die?" She spoke with that poignant, foolish alarm ever "hid in the heart of love." Rosamond smiled straight into her eyes, and her strength and beauty seemed to diffuse a certain power like beams of light. Her voice thrilled through the ear to the heart:

"I'm not going to die. I am safe, contented, happy."

"I've often thought," began Ruth, hesitatingly—"I have hoped you would marry. I never expected you to be serene, a lone stick like me. You have such an appetite for joy! How could you be contented with that one glory left out?"

Rosamond did not answer at once, but the peace of her presence still made itself felt, and Ruth was sure she had not proved her too far.

"That is one of the things I meant to tell you to-night," she began, slowly, as if she had some difficulty in making her phrases fit. "It was not left out. Three

years ago I met some one in Italy. He died, and so if I— In any case, I should never have married." Her voice was still musical and unmoved, and Ruth looked at her in amazement. There seemed to be nothing to say. Rosamond went on, broodingly: "You will be glad to know how perfect it was. We understood each other from the first. Whatever it may mean to say, 'I am yours—you are mine,' was true for us. It was when that feeling came that I began to understand life a little better. It was my alphabet. I never spoke about it to you because he died so soon after we found each other. And I didn't take it well. Then I was a child too." For the first time some remote sadness crept into her voice—a tinge of regret for a beauty missed. Ruth could not answer; she was beginning not to understand. Her friend seemed to speak from the state of one charged with a knowledge not to be shared.

"However," continued Rosamond, rousing herself and calling back her former lightness, "it's absurd to wish we had been better and braver and sweeter. What's done is done, and now—the winter is past, the rain is over and gone."

Ruth dared probe her no further; she felt invisible barriers.

"Is this another of your witch ways?" she asked, with a groping return to the tangible. "Flowers everywhere? I've been speerin' through the dark and naming them. That's golden-rod in the big jar at my feet; asters, too. Those are columbines on the mantel, and you've put mignonette and heliotrope on the table, just where they used to stand. Do you carry the magic lamp? In my day florists never brought the seasons quite together like righteousness and peace."

Rosamond put on a merry disdain.

"Magic lamp!" quoth she—"a kitchen cupboard full. You might as well learn now that lamps seem magical only when they're out of place. Come, old lady, isn't it your bedtime? Do you still go when it's dark under the table?"

"Yes, but not to-night! Still, I suppose we ought to be getting home. I hate to leave this fire. At least, let's take some of the flowers with us."

"With us, forsooth! We're going to stay here."

"No, child; not in mildewed beds! I draw my line at that."

Rosamond took both her hands and drew her up from the chair.

"Come and see!" she said. "The ocular proof! I scorn to argue." She led the way out into the hall, and up the broad worn stairs. Ruth followed, like a child.

"I'm a coward, and you know it," said she. "But to-night I'm not afraid. I wouldn't have believed I could be induced to stay till this hour in a deserted house with only sweet you to protect me. But here I am, and here 'I means to stick,' if you say so."

The spacious hall above was peopled with playing lights and moving shadows. The clock on the landing ticked with ancient peace. The firelight came smiling and beckoning from the two opposite rooms at the head of the stairs. Ruth, speechless, stepped into one chamber and then the other. The fires blazed opulently; the beds were ready, turned down in the V shape both girls had learned from their mothers; it seemed to belong to their childhood together.

"Are we going to stay here?" Ruth cried. "Here together? Why, it's like Christmas! It's like heaven!"

"Into bed with you! I'm going down, but I'll come back again presently and tuck you up. And—if you lie still, like a good little lady, I'll tell you a story."

Ruth began throwing off her clothes in haste.

"Rosamond," she called blithely after her, "cover up the sitting-room fire. We forgot the fender."

So much of life is a barren gleanings after the true harvest! Little broken impressions, scintillæ of feeling, stay floating about in the memory, and happy is he who can fit them into some sort of a patch-work when days are bare again. Ruth was never so happy, so well content, she remembered afterwards, as when, with an absorbing delight in physical well-being, and a charming sense of the new and absolutely desirable, she made ready for bed, stopping here and there as she moved about the room to greet some ancient treasure with a murmur of delight. There was the red cow with one horn; they had milked her daily in other times. There were the wax flowers they had tried to imitate; but, alas! poor little handmaids, because they worked surreptitiously, with the curious secre-

tiveness of childhood, they had no instruction, and no material save the beeswax in their mothers' work-baskets, chewed into wad by their patient teeth. There, oh joy! was Miranda, the oldest doll of all, with her abbreviated skirt and long pantalettes, sitting woodenly in a corner, quite unmoved by this strange, bright resurrection. Ruth gave her a kiss in passing—a passionate kiss for the sake of former days. She took a handful of sweet-pease from the bunch on the mantel and dropped them in Miranda's lap. Joy was cheap enough to share. Then she slipped into bed and waited. Rosamond came. She placed a chair by the bedside, and seating herself, drew Ruth's hand into hers.

"Once upon a time—" she began.

"Did you cover up the fire?"

"It's all right. Once upon a time there was a little Child, and he was always crying because he didn't know the difference between Here and There. He was always hating to be Here, and longing to be There. So one day a Strong One came and said to him, 'Come, you Silly Thing, you may go There if you want to.' And he set him on a feather of one of his wings and took him There. And There was a place you couldn't imagine if I should describe it to you. The best I can do is to say it was all flowers, and living odors, and pine-trees, and clear sunlight, and sweet winds. It's a place where everybody can be tucked up at night—"

"What makes you have any night?" asked Ruth, from her doze. "Have it all day!"

"Leave out the stars, the night dews, the counsel of the leaves! No; we must have night There. But There black is just as lovely as white; so it's all one. And the Child was happy at once, but the Strong One smiled, and said to him: 'It is always so. They are all happy at once, and they might have been before, if they had had eyes to see that Here is There and There is Here.' And the Child said—" But Ruth was soft asleep and breathing peacefully, and Rosamond smiled with great tenderness. Ruth remembered afterwards that Rosamond bent over her once to kiss her on the eyelids, but only to check herself and to draw back among the shadows.

The late moon was regnant in the chamber when she came broad awake.

Rosamond was standing over her, one hand on hers.

"Oh, what made you wake me? what made you?" she cried, quite querulous in her loss. "I was dreaming such a dream! I was in a place I never saw—I can't describe it—I'm forgetting it now. But they were telling me something; the one thing, you know, that explains everything." She sat up in bed, and tried to grasp at the fleeting memory. "It's gone!" She was near crying as she said it. "I almost had the words, but they won't stay."

Rosamond paid no attention.

"Hurry!" she whispered. "Get up and dress. We are going over to your house now. Come!"

Ruth sprang out of bed, and mechanically laid hands on her clothing. She hesitated for a moment to study Rosamond's face.

"You're not frightened?" she asked. "What is it?"

"I've let you sleep too long, that's all. Don't question, my dear one. Come!"

She did, indeed, look pale, but something so sweet and comforting still hung about her and the smiling room that Ruth was not afraid. It did not come to her till afterwards that somebody—an alien somebody or something—might be in the house. Rosamond gave a quick little movement of relief when the last hook was fastened. She had Ruth's hat and cloak on her arm, and she pressed them upon her in eager haste. Then she threw her own cloak about her, and drew Ruth down the stairs. Ruth forgot to step cautiously lest they be heard; she remembered afterwards how her boots clicked, and the rustling of her dress. The fire still flickered in the sitting-room, and the air of the house exhaled a summer sweetness. Rosamond threw open the front door to an icy breath; she parted her lips and caught at it in sobbing relief.

"Ah," she sighed, "that's good!"

The door closed behind them, and they hurried away down the path. Rosamond swept on like a shadow, her cloak billowing behind her in the wind. A picture flashed before Ruth's vision of their coming, when they had hurried in play; now their haste was tragic.

"Rosamond!" she called, with all the breath left in her, "you've forgotten your hat. You'll get your death."

"Come! come!" called Rosamond, over her shoulder. "Hurry! hurry!"

"Then give me your hand. I can't keep up with you."

"Not now!"—her voice came back like a dying sound on the wind. "Hurry!"

They ran like fleeting clouds. Ruth was capable of more than she could have believed; but, fast as she sped, Rosamond was ever before her, a shapeless dusk in the moonlight.

"There, you mad thing—" Ruth began, as they reached her own door, but the urgency of haste clung to her, and she could not finish. She fitted the key to the lock and stood aside.

"Go in," breathed Rosamond, faintly. "Go in, dear one, dear one!"

Ruth stepped over the sill, and the door closed behind her. She turned and tugged at it with a sudden sense of loss. It would not yield. She put forth all her strength. "Rosamond," she called, "push! I can't move it!"

When the door opened, Ruth looked out on the sterile dusk of the early morning. The moon had gone down, and the earth seemed mourning her. And no one was there. She bent forward into the darkness. "Rosamond," she said. "Rosamond!"

There was no answer. A rustle came from the one oak-tree in the yard. Then there was silence, for the wind had died. In the midst of her gathering alarm a strange peace, a sense of the sweetness and naturalness of the world, fell upon her like a charm, and she smiled out into the darkness as if it had become a friendly face. Then, in serenity of soul, she thought it all out. Rosamond was ever a sprite; now she was playing her a trick. She had gone into the shrubbery to hide. Call, and she would not answer; leave her unnoticed, and a moment would bring her tapping at the window. She shut the door and went in. The rooms were still warm, though the hearth fires had died; and she took a fur cloak from the hall in passing, threw it about her, and sat down by the window to wait. And as she waited, the same lovely content of the evening stole over her again. She closed her eyes, and to a purring sense of spiritual warmth the dream began where it left off, and she learned the secret which explains everything. But she never could remember that dream.

She started awake with the sense of

some one in the room. The fire was blazing up over new kindling; the sun lay warm on her shoulder. Her mother stood there, and the maid was bringing in wood. Ruth rubbed her eyes and worked her way out of her wraps.

"What a sleep!" she yawned. "Oh, I remember. But what made you come home?"

Her mother was looking at her very sadly. She took Ruth's hand. "I had to come," said she. "We've had bad news, and I didn't want you to hear it from any one else. Ruth, you must be brave. Rosamond died yesterday. They wired her aunt Amy from Italy."

Ruth regarded her with straining eyes. Then she began to laugh.

"My poor child," said her mother, beginning to rub the hand she held. Ruth drew it away.

"You mustn't, mummy, you mustn't," said she. "Don't be sorry for me. It isn't sad. It's lovely, only you don't know it. There's been a queer mistake. No, I won't tell you. Just come with me and I'll give you a surprise. Here's your shawl. Put it on." She threw it about her, found some gloves and pressed them upon her. Life seemed very dramatic since last night's prologue. She drew her mother along in merry haste; but at the door Mrs. Hollis left her for a moment to step back into the kitchen and whisper a word to Nora:

"Watch the way we go, and tell Mr. Hollis to follow us. Tell him I can't explain, but he must come."

Then she went out where Ruth was waiting, tapping her foot impatiently, and scanning the path, the shrubbery, the road, lest she be caught herself by her own surprise. She ran an arm through her mother's, and hurried her down the walk. When they passed the stump post-office she laughed again; but her mother's quick look of pain recalled her.

"Poor mother!" she said, in a demure coaxing. "Wait a bit, and you'll laugh too. So Rosamond is dead?"

The tears came fast down her mother's cheeks.

"Yes, dead," she said. "You don't realize it."

Ruth tried hard to be serious.

"Not yet," she assented. "Just now you're realizing for two." They were rounding the curve of the drive. "But I don't see any smoke! The thriftless

thing! she's let the fires go down." They mounted the steps together, and Ruth, in happy assurance, laid her hand upon the latch. It did not yield. Her mother stood looking wildly down the drive, and praying for her husband to come. Ruth, her self-possession inexplicably overthrown, was beating at the door.

"Rosamond!" she was calling. "Oh, Rosamond, let me in! Don't be cruel! Let me in!"

"Dear, come home," said her mother, crying bitterly. "Come home."

Ruth knelt and tried to look through the key-hole. She sprang to her feet.

"I'm going in," she said. "I will go in."

She ran round to the side piazza, on a level with the long windows, opened a blind, and broke a pane with her hand. The blood dripped down on the glass. She turned the fastening, threw up the window, and stepped in, and her mother followed. The room was dark, save for the light from that one window, for all the other blinds were closed. She ran up to the clock and looked it in the face. It was dead and still, the impassive hands pointing stolidly to a lying hour. She laid her hands upon it, as if to shake it into life. The dust lay thick over table and chairs. She threw herself upon her knees before the fireplace and thrust her hand into the ashes. They were cold.

"Mother!" she cried out, piteously. "Mother!"

"Come home, dear, come home!"

Ruth rose to her feet, sick with wonder, yet reanimated by one last hope.

"Just a minute!" she implored, and ran up the dusty stairs. The door of her own sleeping-room was closed, but she flung it open and walked shudderingly into the darkness within. The bed was unmade, with only a mildewed cover over the mattress. A mouse fled silently across the floor, a swift brown shadow. Where was the china cow? Where was Miranda? With a throb of premonitory knowledge she threw up the cover of the trunk near the bed. There lay the doll, on orderly rows of playthings packed away for doomsday; they looked as if they might have been there years.

Her mother had followed her, and Ruth turned about, trying to smile.

"I begin to understand it now," she said. "I'll go home. You mustn't think

"I'm crazy. I'm not." They descended the stairs together and crossed the deserted sitting-room. At the window, Mrs. Hollis paused before stepping out.

"I can't understand it," she said, musingly. "The house isn't in the least musty. It's as sweet as a garden. Sweeter!"

Ruth stopped short, arrested by the

truth. The odors of the night were all about her, and as she stood there accepting them, great peace and the sense of security fell upon her like a mantle. She began to smile.

"And they might all be happy," she said to herself, "if they could only remember that There is just the same as Here!"